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Carter in Ethiopia: Revisiting one of the Nobel's missed chances - former president Jimmy Carter

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The award of the Nobel peace prize to former president Jimmy Carter is a manifestation of selective memory. What follows is a story about how the precepts of the Carter administration's human-rights policy-and that president's aversion to the use of force in the defense of moral principles-became an impediment to possibly saving 30 million Ethiopians from the undertow of totalitarianism.

The story begins during the Nixon and Ford administrations, when the murderous Ethiopian Dergue ("Committee") and its merciless leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, rose to power concomitant with the domestic distraction of Watergate and the fall of South Vietnam. The Dergue began executing its own followers and threatened to do the same to more members of the Ethiopian royal family. Since Mengistu's ruthless and dynamic regime seemed unlikely to fall, the outgoing U.S. secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, trying to keep an iron in the fire, continued some of the military assistance that had been going to Addis Ababa. If the United States were to give up all its leverage in Ethiopia, the country would simply take the next step and become a Soviet satellite, with vast and unpleasant consequences for its entire population.

President Ford and Kissinger were replaced in January 1977 by Jimmy Carter and his new secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, with Andrew Young as U.N. ambassador adopting a high profile on African affairs. They wanted a policy that demonstrated more concern for sub-Saharan Africa but with less heavy-handedness. In the Horn of Africa, that translated immediately into asymmetry because the Soviets were becoming more enterprising and brazenly aggressive than ever.

With Ethiopia riven by revolutionary turmoil, the Soviets helped their irredentist Somalian clients to plan an invasion of Ethiopia's Ogaden Desert; the aim was to use Somalia to pressure Ethiopia into the Soviet orbit, and then to call off the Somalian invasion. Somalia was at the time a country of only 3 million nomads, whereas Ethiopia had a more urbanized population ten times the size-excellent fodder for the mechanized African satellite that gradually became Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's supreme objective. The Soviets, while threatening Ethiopia with a Somalian invasion, were also offering it military aid-the classic carrot-and-stick strategy. Yet, thanks partly to the M-60 tanks and F-5 warplanes that Mengistu had been receiving from the United States as the Ford administration was leaving office-as well as American spare parts coming to him courtesy of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin-the Ethiopian leader was hesitant to go through the disruptive task of switching armorers for an entire army.

In the spring of 1977, despite the military threat from Somalia, Carter cut off all arms deliveries to Ethiopia because of its awful human- rights record. The Soviets next dispatched East German security police and Cuban advisers to Addis Ababa to help Mengistu consolidate his regime, and invited the Ethiopian ruler to Moscow for a week-long state visit. In the coming months, with the help of the East Germans, the Dergue would gun down hundreds of Ethiopian teenagers in the streets in a process that came to be known as the "Red Terror."

There was still some hope, though. The Ethiopian revolution, leftist as it was, and despite Mengistu's diatribes, showed relatively few other signs of overt anti-Americanism, nor were there any foreign hostages, as would be the case in Iran. Israel's new prime minister, Menachem Begin, in an attempt to save Ethiopian Jews, pleaded with Carter not to close the door completely on Ethiopia, but to give Mengistu some military assistance against the Somalian advance: for the Soviets, having unleashed the Somalians, were failing to engineer the cease-fire between the two countries that became part of their overall game plan.

Carter refused to resume the arms relationship with Mengistu, which was somewhat understandable given

Ethiopia's tilt toward Moscow. Still, in principle at least, he was very interested in helping the Somalians, whose hell-bent irredentism was providing Washington with a fresh and different kind of opportunity to muddle the outcome in Ethiopia. National security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, to his credit, wanted to give the Somalians arms, deploy the U.S. Navy in the region, and link Soviet behavior in the Horn to progress on nuclear-arms talks. But in the end Vance's State Department won this particular policy battle, proclaiming that as long as Somalia was illegally occupying territory in another country, it could not be helped. As for Ethiopia, State offered it a negotiated settlement, but with no carrot or stick held in the background. The Soviets were less aloof and legalistic: They simply gave Mengistu the military aid the Americans wouldn't, and Ethiopia began to turn the tide of the Somalian invasion. It was an early example of a presidency with a self-canceling foreign policy, the result of which was less appeasement than ineffectuality.

Even if Ford had been elected in 1976, it is doubtful whether his instincts and those of Kissinger would have been enough to save Ethiopia. What's clear, though, is that the Carter administration played its hand terribly by relying on statements rather than force or genuine pressure. The upshot was that Ethiopia went from being yet another nasty, left-leaning regime to a full-fledged Marxist state, in which hundreds of thousands of people were to die in crackpot collectivization and "villagization" schemes, to say nothing of the million or so people who would die in famines that were as much a consequence of made-in-Moscow agriculture policies as they were of drought. I interviewed survivors of collectivization and villagization in refugee camps in Somalia in the mid 1980s: Their stories evoked the horror of Stalin's Ukrainian deportations of the 1930s, with the ensuing "terror famine."

Vance and Young had wanted an African solution to an African problem, which in the context of the times meant a Soviet solution. For in poor and populous Ethiopia the Communists could implement policies that, with the exception of Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania, they no longer dared to try in an already-restive Soviet bloc.

The linkage between Carter's heartfelt but ineffectual foreign policy in the Horn of Africa and the mass deaths that followed in Ethiopia is more direct than that between President Nixon's incursion into a rural area of Cambodia in pursuit of enemy sanctuaries to help ease the withdrawal of American troops and the Khmer Rouge takeover six years later. As for the Nixon administration's culpability in the 1973 coup that brought Gen. Augusto Pinochet to power in Chile, an issue that has become a particular concern of the international Left, here without meaning to disregard the importance of even one human life—the dreadful fact is that we are talking about a few thousand deaths, rather than hundreds of thousands.

Ethiopia may well have been beyond saving, whereas the Nixon administration actively supported the Chilean coup. But we should also not forget that this same Chilean military regime, in the first seven years of its rule—while the rest of Latin America was dithering in socialist experiments—privatized all but 25 of 500 state companies: an action that would lead to the creation of over a million jobs and the reduction of the poverty rate from a third of the population to a tenth, while also lowering infant mortality from 79 per 1,000 births to 11 per 1,000. The Ethiopians should have been so lucky as to have a Pinochet.

Had Carter promptly armed the Somalians, he might have moderated the behavior of both Mengistu and the Soviets in the Horn. His decision not to do so made for a policy that was more sanctimonious than virtuous. Now that he has won the Nobel peace prize, Carter will likely step up his criticism of using force against Iraq. But as the example of Ethiopia shows, when it comes to dealing with brutal regimes, his instincts are not to be trusted.

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